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Meeting in person? So '03

Facebook.com, a site based on college social relationships, inspires fierce devotion from its 6 million members

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The Courier-Journal

The most widely read book on American college campuses is not a novel, a textbook or even a magazine.

It has no pages. It uses no ink.

It's a Web site called Facebook.com, an online register of who's who at the local U.

The virtual yearbook, founded in 2004, has some 6 million members at more than 2,100 colleges nationwide -- including Indiana University, IU Southeast and 33 Kentucky colleges, such as Spalding, Bellarmine, Berea, the University of Louisville and the University of Kentucky.

According to a Facebook spokesman, about 15,000 accounts are created every day.

"It's a huge phenomenon right now," recent Indiana University graduate Meredith DeCosta said. "It's almost a cult -- very crazy."

Some students are spending so much time on Facebook that educators are worried their studies are suffering, and some students' personal Web pages are *so* personal they've gotten them in trouble.

Each school's Facebook is a fairly exclusive club.

A college-affiliated e-mail address is required to register, which restricts membership to a single school's staff, students, faculty and recently departed alumni. Each school's Facebook is separate from the others; an IU Facebook user can't automatically peek at the UK Facebook.

Students from other colleges -- and high school students -- can join a particular school's Facebook only if invited by an existing member.

"You get contacted by people on MySpace that you have no common ground with," said Frank Hoskins, 21, a University of Louisville student from Middlesboro, Ky. "They might live 2,000 miles away.

"On Facebook, you have a lot more in common because you are either at the same school or you have the same friends."

More than 11 million unique visitors last month clicked on Facebook.com, and more than 4 million "Facebookies" log in every day, site spokesman Chris Hughes said. Many spend an hour or more

looking at photos, perusing private messages or reading "walls," the area of each profile page where public messages are posted.

It's human nature to be curious about other people. The cute guy in the third row, the brainiac with all the answers. Finding out is just a few mouse clicks away.

"You get a really good sense on Facebook about people's personalities and how they see themselves," DeCosta said.

Facebook can be used for flirting, but users say it's a primarily platonic milieu that's most useful for making new friends and reconnecting with old ones.

Tiffani Jackson, a recent U of L grad, tracked down a high school friend she hadn't talked to in six years.

"I'm always looking at my 'friends list' to see who updated their profiles, then searching for people I went to high school with," said Jackson, 25, an engineer for the Louisville Metro Air Pollution Control District.

Eric Wilson rekindled relationships with high school chums he thought he might never see again.

"When I moved to Louisville from the small town of Campbellsville, Ky., I left all of my friends from home," said Wilson, 22, a U of L senior. "But with the click of a couple of buttons, I was able to find 80 different people who had graduated from Campbellsville High."

DeCosta made amends with an old boyfriend and got reacquainted with a gal pal she hadn't seen since third grade. Of her 100 or so Facebook friends, 15 are people she had lost touch with.

DeCosta prides herself on being different. When the Facebook bandwagon got rolling at IU last year, she refused to jump aboard. But now?

"I'm a Facebook addict," she said. "I love it."

Facebookies aren't shy about using words like "addiction" or "obsession." Lauren Ingram, a U of L student who works part time for the Jefferson County Attorney's office, checks the site three or four times a day.

"It's made me late for work a few times," said Ingram, a 21-year-old senior who is co-chair of the College Democrats of Kentucky. "You look at a friend's profile, then at a friend of theirs, then at a friend of that friend, and the next thing you know, you've wasted a good hour."

Some students are wasting more than that. Some college administrators are concerned that it's becoming more important to surf the 'book than hit the books.

"There are probably some students who are devoting time to Facebook that they could and should be devoting ... to academics," said Chris Schmidt, dean of students at Lindsey Wilson College in Columbia, Ky. "But you and I both know that if it wasn't Facebook, they'd probably be wasting time on something else. Still, it's a legitimate concern."

Facebookies sometimes forget that teachers and administrators can access the site, too. Some students have found out the hard way.

Students at the University of Kentucky, Northern Kentucky University and other schools have been disciplined for drinking in their dorms. They essentially convicted themselves by posting incriminating photos on their Facebook profiles.

Penn State police used Facebook to identify students who rushed the field after the Nittany Lions defeated Ohio State in an Oct. 8 football game.

Facebook prohibits the posting of words or images that it deems to be objectionable. But it's impossible to police 11 million profiles. And some people will always push the limits of good taste and common sense.

"You're putting yourself out there on Facebook," said U of L junior Melanie Tate, 21. "As with anything else, some people go farther than others."

Facebook encourages users to be prudent about what they post. Teachers, coaches and even future employers (using alumni contacts) can examine Facebook profiles. If students must post photos from the latest drunken debauch -- a common Facebook pastime -- Hughes, the Facebook spokesman, cautions them to take advantage of privacy settings that permit only friends to take a peek.

DeCosta, 22, teaches English at Floyd Central High School in New Albany. Her students are dying to know about the real "Miss D," and because college friends can give high school kids access to Facebook, DeCosta makes sure her profile is squeaky clean.

"Some people write some very goofy things that, taken out of context, might make a kid think, 'Whoa! What is Miss D doing?' " she said.

Miss D is waiting for the next wave of the Facebook craze to begin -- a site for high school students.

"It will *really* blow up from there," DeCosta said.

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